



UNIVERSITY OF
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IFAS EXTENSION

Friday's Feature

By

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February Gardening Tips

Our warmer than normal temperatures have some people pulling out the fertilizer spreader. While February is a great month for some gardening tasks, remember there is still the potential for more cold weather. It is usually mid-March or early April before spring arrives along the Gulf Coast. We still have the potential for additional frosts or freezes.

February is not the month to stimulate the growth of warm season lawns and shrubs by applying fertilizer. Fertilizers, when applied too early, are either wasted or can cause the lawn to green up. If the lawn does green up and is still lush when a freeze hits, the risk of "winter kill" is increased. Mid-March to April is usually early enough to fertilize the lawn and landscape plants.

Mid to late February is a good time to do any major pruning of summer flowering shrubs such as althea, hibiscus, oleander, rose and abelia. Summer flowering shrubs produce flower buds on current season's growth, so pruning just before the spring flush is recommended.

However, do not prune the spring flowering shrubs such as azaleas, banana shrubs, spireas, Indian hawthorn and oriental magnolias. These shrubs produce flower buds in late summer and carry the buds through the winter in order to flower in the spring. Prune spring flowering shrubs now and you will be cutting off their flowers. This type of shrub should be pruned soon after they flower but before mid-June.

Other plants can benefit from pruning in February. Deciduous fruit trees, such as apple and plum, should have their branches thinned and pruned for the desired form. Most evergreen shrubs can also be pruned now.

And if you have some large, overgrown broadleaf shrubs that need to be cut back, now is the safest time to rejuvenate these plants. Rejuvenation is a drastic method of pruning old shrubs that have become much too large or have a large amount of non-flowering wood.

February is the best time to establish English peas and Irish potatoes in the vegetable garden. These vegetables prefer cooler weather and won't do as well if planted later in the spring.

This is also the time to plant snap peas and sweet peas. Snap peas are a group of edible-podded peas differing from snow peas in their round instead of flat pod shapes. An edible-podded pea is similar to an ordinary garden (English) pea. The pod of the English pea is lined on the inside with a thin, hard, tough membrane which contracts as the pod ripens and dries, causing the pod to open, twist, and expel its seeds. In contrast, pods of the edible-podded pea, including snap peas, do not have the membrane and do not open when ripe.

The potato is one of America's most popular vegetables. *Solanum tuberosum*, the scientific name for the potato, also called the Irish potato, is a cool season crop and is relatively easy to grow.

The potato tuber is the plant "part" planted to grow a new potato plant. When the tuber is planted it is called a "seed" potato. Only certified seed potatoes should be planted in the home garden. Certification insures that the seed tubers are free of disease.

Do not purchase potatoes from the grocery store to plant in the home garden. These may carry harmful potato diseases that will hurt the growth of your crop. Tubers at the grocery store may also be treated with sprout inhibitors that may also hurt the growth of the plant in the garden.

So if you are anxious to work in the garden, plant Irish potatoes or English peas. You can even spend your time pruning summer flowering shrubs or overgrown shrubs. But, put the fertilizer spreader back into storage. Wait until our lawn grasses have fully come out of their winter dormancy before giving them an application of fertilizer.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.